

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



Unknown Soldier Dragged To Oputa Panel

The creation of the Oputa Panel Human Right Violation Investigation Commission (HRVIC) is one of the most meaningful actions of the Fourth Republic government. Though disabled by its paucity of power, HRVIC tries to appease people's gnawing hunger for truth, justice, retribution, reparations, and reconciliation. President Obasanjo has placed the full weight of his office behind the HRVIC and by appearing in person, he has demonstrated that no one is above the law. It is to be hoped that his predecessors will emulate Obasanjo's example which has been reinforced by his stated readiness to appear a second time before the HRVIC to answer charges of human rights violations made against the previous government by the Ransome-Kuti family.

The petition from the family refers to the attack by soldiers on the family residence, occupied by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, which was called the Kalakuta Republic. When questioned by journalists about the petition, President Obasanjo was reported as replying: "I don't know what happened to the Kalakuta Republic and I don't know if there can be another republic within a republic." (ThisDay July 31, 2001).

This is pregnant speculation in the current context of the discourse on the nature of federalism in Nigeria, but it begs the big questions raised by the Ransome Kuti petition. Since the incident occurred twenty-four years ago, it is necessary to refresh the memories of older readers and inform the younger ones of just what happened to the Kalakuta Republic.

On his return from the United State in 1970, Fela who considers himself a Pan-Africanist and his mother a champion of "traditional" African culture, had founded a commune on the property at 14A Agege Motor Road. While in the United States, Fela had fallen in love with an African American, named Sandra Smith. She exposed him to the Black Power movement, which had a tremendous influence on the development of his political philosophy.

Before 1977, Fela had had several run-ins with both the army and police and, in addition to his non grata political ideology, he had been charged with drug use. After a short incarceration in the early 1970s, he had christened the home on Agege Motor Road and adjoining property as the Kalakuta Republic. "Kalakuta" referred to the name by which his jail cell had been known, and "Republic" signified his disdain for the authority of the federation of Nigeria within his compound.

On February 18, 1977, the Kalakuta Republic was surrounded by nearly a thousand soldiers. According to eyewitness accounts, the soldiers, armed with bayonets affixed and clubs, stormed the compound without warning, ostensibly to arrest two young men who had committed a traffic violation. The soldiers broke down the door and began beating people inside. Bekolari Ransome-Kuti was bayoneted in the forehead and hand, tossed from a window, and then beaten. He was forced to march on a broken foot from the residence to the army barracks nearby. His medical clinic in the compound was destroyed. Clothes were torn off some of the young women in the house, and they were forced to go outside naked. Some claimed they were later raped. Fela himself was severely beaten and hospitalized. Soldiers pulled Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, then nearly seventy-seven years old, by the hair and threw her out of the window, severely injuring her legs and causing her to go into shock. A fire ignited and destroyed the entire property.

Although the army blamed the fire on an explosion of the residence's generator, FRK later called that "a fantastic

lie" (Daily Star, Feb 25, 1977). Other presents at the raid agreed with her and insisted that the army had deliberately set the fire. The raid, popularly known as the "Kalakuta War", received tremendous publicity in two major newspapers and caused the military government to convene a public administrative tribunal to investigate the incident. Reportedly, the tribunal threatened to make international news when a New York Times correspondent attempted to attend hearings; the day following the first sitting of the tribunal, the correspondent was arrested and deported. In the

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end, blame was apportioned both to "overzealous unknown soldiers" and to Fela. The Kalakuta Republic and surrounding land occupied by uninvolved citizens were destroyed. Neither these citizens nor the Ransome-Kuti family was compensated for their property loss. This is still a sore point for them, and they continue to press their claims against the government for compensation for the destruction and confiscation of the property. Years later, a Lagos State secondary school was built on the site, and in a rather gratuitous manner, the school was named the Reverend Ransome Kuti Memorial School. On April 13, 1978, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti died as a result of her injuries.

One year after her death, her three sons and hundreds of sympathizers staged a protest march to commemorate the first anniversary of her death. They carried a mock coffin that they deposited at the 14A Agege Motor Road Property (Sunday Observer, April 15, 1979). On the second anniversary of the Kalakuta incident, the family took out a full-page advertisement in the February 18, 1979 issue of Sunday Punch.

NO JUSTICE

KALAKUTA AFFAIR

2ND ANNIVERSARY

Armed Nigeria Soldiers marched on our family house at 14A, Agege Motor Road.

They burnt it completely to the ground. It was a 5-hour long military assault.

Scores of people were severely wounded and some of us have been permanently maimed.

Properties worth millions of naira were destroyed, and hundreds of people were later rendered homeless.

Our dear mother eventually died from the shock she received from this inhuman assault on her self-esteem.

Today, two years after, we still have not heard any word of remorse or apology; nor have we had any reparations for these atrocities and all our immense losses.

Yet we know for certain that other victims of less, but similar calamity have been treated with speed and generosity.

The question in everybody's mouth is: what is our crime to deserve this op-

pressive treatment in our own country where we are supposed to be free citizens? Kuti Family

Twenty years later, Kalakuta's erstwhile President, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, died but his musical legacy thrives and will live on long after all the other actors in the Kalakuta incident have passed away. Decades before HRVIC was conceived, the lyrics of Fela's music bore witness to the violations of human rights by uniformed personnel and the military government.

If the hearings of the Oputa Commission sometimes appear as tragic theatre, then Fela's lyrics should sound the background theme music.

The titles of many of Fela's songs were acronyms of radical political concepts such as Mass (Movement Against Second Slavery), ITT (International Thief), BBC (Big Blind Country), VIP (Vagabonds In Power), BONN (Beast Of No Nation), which attacked government's pronouncements about respect for human rights as 'animal talk'. Fela also manipulated the spelling and sound of words to make political statements in titles such as Suffering and Smiling (in which he attacks both Christianity and Islam for perpetuating oppression in Nigeria) and in words such as Democracy, Yabis and Zombie.

In Alagbon, he pillories the tendency of a constituted authority to employ extrajudicial means and exert excessive force in the name of law and order. He sings, "... for Alagbon dem no get respect for human beings/dem no know say you get blood like them/dem go send them dog to bite-bite you/dem go point them gun for your face .../dem go lock you for months and months/dem dey call am investigation. In "VIP" he observes: Hungry people dem no see/jobless people/dem no know/dem go dey ride best car/dem go dey chop best food/dem go they/live best. And in why Black Man Dey Suffer, he laments: "...some people come from far away land/dem fight and take our land/na since then trouble start o/our riches dem take away/in return then give in dem colony/dem take our culture away from us/dem give us dem culture. We no understand/black people we no know our cultural heritage."

It seems many people still do not know "our cultural heritage" nor fully appreciate current cultural achievements such as Vanguard's Art Editor, Helon Habila, who won the second Michael Caine prize for African writing in London recently for his story, Love Poems. Habila faced strong competition from 120 writers from almost 30 African countries, including works from some of the continent's renowned writers such as Nurudeen Farah.

The chair of the judging panel, Professor Dan Jacobson, a famous South African writer, said, "His story impressed the judges, especially by its qualities of intensity and alertness to some of the most sinister aspects of Nigerian life under military rule."

In the Vanguard 26 July 2001 edition, Habila reports: "In attendance were various distinguished persons such as the Zimbabwean High Commissioner, The Pakistani High Commissioner, the Mozambican High Commissioner, Mr Patrick Wilmot, Mr Ben Okri, Buchi Emecheta and many others. The Nigerian High Commissioner was represented by the Commission's Librarian."

I am very pleased to know that the Nigerian High Commission in London has liberty run by (presumably) a professional librarian and I imply no disrespect to the Librarian BUT does it not strike a discordant note that at such an important occasion for Nigeria literature, the young Habila was not supported more robustly by his nation's diplomatic representatives in the UK. What does this signal about the priority and values of the High Commission and thus, by extension, the Nigerian government?